**GOVT 2305  
Ideology – What is Government for Anyway?   
Part 1 – The Roots of Ideological Dispute**  
  
**Intro and Definitions**

In this section, I want to go a bit further than the information providing about the key terms of government and politics and dig a bit further into the concept of ideology. Some of this material was introduced in the previous section so you should have general familiarity with the terms “liberal” and “conservative.” In this section we dig a bit deeper into these and related concepts.

This is important because a full understanding of ideology helps us come to grips with what people want government to do – or not do. This section is meant to go over a full range of viewpoints that people tend to have, and to focus on those that are most resonant in American politics. Ideology can also provide cues for people to make evaluations about issue, candidates and many other things. It helps determine public opinion, much like party identification does. We cover this aspect of ideology in the section on public opinion later this semester.

Let’s repeat the definition of ideology offered previously.  
- *A set of issue positions based on some underlying value.*

But there are many more and there’s little’s little harm in looking at those as well.

*- The body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture.  
- A set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic, or other system.  
- A systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture   
- A system of ideas and ideals, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy  
- An ideology is a set of opinions or beliefs of a group or an individual. Very often ideology refers to a set of political beliefs or a set of ideas that characterize a particular culture.*

And here’s a very fancy one: *“Ideologies are systems of abstract thought applied to public matters and thus make this concept central to politics. Implicitly every political or economic tendency* [*entails*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logical_consequence) *an ideology whether or not it is propounded as an explicit system of thought.”*

**Political Philosophy**  
  
I don’t want to wade fully into this subject, but political ideologies tend to bleed into political theory and political philosophy. There is an entire sub-discipline in political science devoted to this. It might be ab area that you find especially interesting, and if you choose to pursue studying politics you might be interested in taking some classes. But keep in mind that this topic tends to very abstract and often tells us nothing about the practical world of politics and government. Nevertheless, the ideas are very useful and worth pursuing if this is your thing.

Here’s a [definition](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/467661/political-philosophy) from the Encyclopedia Britannica:

***Political Philosophy,****branch of*[*philosophy*](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/456811/philosophy)*that is concerned, at the most*[*abstract*](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/659369/abstract)*level, with the concepts and arguments involved in political opinion. The meaning of the term political is itself one of the major problems of political philosophy. Broadly, however, one may characterize as political all those practices and institutions that are concerned with* [*government*](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/240105/government)*.*

[Political Philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_philosophy) has a long history. People have long discussed what the right structure of society ought to be, and what relationship ought to exist between the state and the individual. The questions asked include “What extent of state control is appropriate?” and “What are the legitimate ends of government?” Philosophical considerations were important to the people who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – among other vital governing documents – because persuasive arguments need a substantive basis.

If you are interested, here’s a link to an open Yale course: [Introduction to Political Philosophy](http://oyc.yale.edu/political-science/plsc-114).   
  
And if you’d like to read up on major works of political philosophy – or at least have introduce yourselves to the ideas they contain, you might be interested in the following:   
- [Politics](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html) by Aristotle  
- [The Republic](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm) by Plato  
- [The Prince](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm) by Machiavelli  
- [Two Treatises of Government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government) by John Locke   
  
The ideas contained in the last link were essential to justifying the American Revolution.

**The French Revolution’s Impact on political ideology: Edmund Burke v Thomas Paine**

The contemporary ideological disputes we have can be traced back to disputes over the French Revolution – which became a turning point in attitudes about the proper structure of government, much more than the American Revolution.

The term “ideology” was once used to describe the study of the science of ideas. It [became used in the contemporary sense](http://www.historytoday.com/maurice-cranston/french-revolution-ideas-and-ideologies) during the [French Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Revolution) when conflict emerged over how governments ought to be organized. This revolution was different than the American Revolution in that ideas played a more prominent role and people were organized far more around those ideas. The American Revolution was far more pragmatic and oriented around self-rule. The US Constitution as we will see is rooted in a pragmatic view of human nature and self-interest. We will cover that soon enough.

The simple purpose of the French Revolution was to overturn the French social and governing order – it had been an absolute monarchy - and replace it with a system that allowed for broader participation in the affairs of government. That’s the simple story anyway. It was similar to what occurred in Britain in the late 1680s, but more extreme since the French actually killed off the aristocracy.   
  
Many of the ideas that drove the French Revolution can be traced back to [John Locke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_locke), but as reinterpreted by [Rousseau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques_Rousseau) and [Voltaire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltaire). Collectively we can call them members of the [enlightenment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Enlightenment). Many of these authors sought to rethink the basis of human society by imagining the existence of a state of nature – a condition prior to the development of governments – and determining why rational individuals would choose the leave it. This allowed for rethinking the reasons governments exist and the relationship between individuals and the government. Some suggested that this allowed for radical rethinking of what types of governing systems should exist. This was also used to justify political revolutions against those existing systems that could not be justified under these new theories.  
  
Like rule based on the divine right of the monarch.

The French Revolution turned violent, which included killing off much of the aristocracy. This led to an influential line of criticism against the revolution from [Edmund Burke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Burke), a member of the British Parliament who was a supporter of the American Revolution, and the Glorious Revolution before it. He wrote up his criticism in a book titled [Reflections on the Revolution in France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflections_on_the_Revolution_in_France). The French Revolution attempted to completely redo the governing system. Burke was a supporter of the American Revolution however. The American Revolution did not – as we will see, the American constitutional system was based on the British model. It did not reorder the governing. It simply replaced who was in charge.

[Click here](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/e/edmund_burke.html) for some choice quotes from Burke. You’ll probably recognize a few. Example: “Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it.” Burke opposed the idea that governments should be creation upon abstract principles and rights and was more in favor of building governments upon ancient institutions and arrangements. He is often argued to be the founder of the modern conservative movement. Many contemporary conservative ideas are traced to him.

Burke argued that by completely replacing the previous governing system, and eliminating the people who knew how to run it, the new French government lost pragmatic knowledge and was doomed to failure. This was a criticism of ideology in general. He disputed the idea that someone could write out principles on paper and expect them to work seamlessly.   
He also argued that members of Parliament should vote for the long terms interests of the nation, not the shorts terms needs of their constituents. The trick was to establish strong stable institutions.

His key point: Governing is difficult.   
  
A good governing system contains features that evolve over time due to trial and error. No one knows what will work or not work until it is tried out. Designing a political system from scratch – one that works well – is difficult, and very likely impossible. Burke was a critic of “[state of nature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_of_nature)” and “[social contract](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract)” theories. So was [David Hume](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Hume). This put him at odds with John Locke, as well as the basic theory underlying the justification of American Revolution. Hume did not believe that a state of nature ever really existed, or that governments stemmed from a contract people entered into where they consented to form a government. He believed that people were social by nature and always existed in a governing arrangement of some sort which was modified gradually over time.   
  
There was never a state of nature, in other words. He believed change is possible, but only if it done gradually in order to ensure that social order – and the benefits that results from a governing system that works – is not lost while those changes occur. He saw this happen in both the Glorious and American Revolutions. He did not see this in the French Revolution which led to social disruptions across society.   
  
This is important for our understanding of one aspect of contemporary ideological conflict. Can a better society be achieved quickly by implementing aggressive policies designed to pursue certain aims, or can these only be established slowly? One approach, which has come to be known as [Burkean Conservatism](http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=695) holds that change must be done slowly. Certain goals – like equal protection before the laws and expanded suffrage – are worth pursuing, but not at the risk of undermining social stability. They supported reform not revolution. This is very similar to the positions that contemporary conservatives take. In a very simple sense, conservatism can be thought of as the preferred ideology of those whose interests are served by how things are already – the status quo – and liberalism the preferred ideology of those benefitted by change, especially change that expands participation and broadens the benefits of self-government.

What has become known as the liberal approach – but was once known (maybe more properly) as progressivism – argues that these goals must be pursued diligently. Delays are only intended to prevent their implementation and to limit the benefits of self-government to a small set of people. The status quo can, and ought to be, transformed in order to ensure that the benefits of society are made available to everyone in society, and not reserved to elites.

[Thomas Paine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Paine), among others, supported such a view. Paine is best known as the author of [Common Sense](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Sense_(pamphlet)), which helped spread the arguments promoting the American Revolution. But was also a supporter of the French Revolution. He argued against Edmund Burke’s position on the French Revolution in the [Rights of Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rights_of_Man). According to Paine, government should be more deliberately tied into the general population and more aggressive policies should be promoted to deal with the plight of the poor.  
  
The book had two parts:

“In Part I, Paine urged political rights for all men because of their natural equality in the sight of God. All forms of hereditary government, including the British constitution, were condemned because they were based on farce or force. Only a democratic republic could be trusted to protect the equal political rights of all men. Part II was even more radical for Paine argued for a whole program of social legislation to deal with the shocking condition of the poor.” – [History Guide](http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/paine.html).

These led to his arrest for seditious libel – a concept we will study much later in class. He was also a fierce critic of religion – though was not an atheist. His later book, The Age of Reason articulated his views: “Paine rejected Christianity, denied that the Bible was the revealed word of God, condemned many of the Old Testament stories as immoral and claimed that the Gospels were marred by discrepancies.”

This also contrasts with Edmund Burke who thought that religious institutions provided necessary stability in society. In a recently published book, [a noted writer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuval_Levin) makes the argument that the conflict between Burke and Paine is the course of the ongoing conflict between conservatism and liberalism today. [Click here](http://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/excerpt-the-great-debate) for commentary.

So to make this point concisely:   
- Conservatism can trace its roots to Burke, and his belief that government must rest on tradition and progress must be slow steady and gradual.  
- Liberalism can trace its roots to Paine and his belief that government should rest on reason – not tradition – and that broad based problems can be solved by governmental programs.

Each is rooted in different attitudes about the French Revolution, but also keep this in mind. Ideological disputes are often tied into self- interest. If current arrangements benefit you, you might be conservative. If you are benefitted by change, you might be liberal.

**The Left and the Right**

Over time, these ideologies have been described as being either [left wing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-wing_politics) or [right wing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right-wing_politics).

- Click here for a look at the [left – right political spectrum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left%E2%80%93right_politics).

From Wikipedia: “In [left-right politics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-right_politics), **left-wing** describes an outlook or specific position that accepts or supports [social equality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_equality), often in opposition to [social hierarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_hierarchy) and [social inequality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_inequality).It typically involves a concern for those in society who are perceived as disadvantaged relative to others and an assumption that there are unjustified inequalities that need to be reduced or abolished.”

From Wikipedia: “**right-wing** describes an outlook or specific position that accepts or supports [social hierarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_stratification) or [social inequality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_inequality).Social hierarchy and social inequality is viewed by those affiliated with the Right as either inevitable, natural, normal, or desirable, whether it arises through traditional social differences or from competition in market economies. It typically accepts or justifies this position on the basis of [natural law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_law) or [tradition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition).”

This sets the stage for the growth of ideological movements in the 19th Century, much of which is still impacting our discussion of politics today. The next section will look at and attempt to define the various “isms” that dominate political discourse.